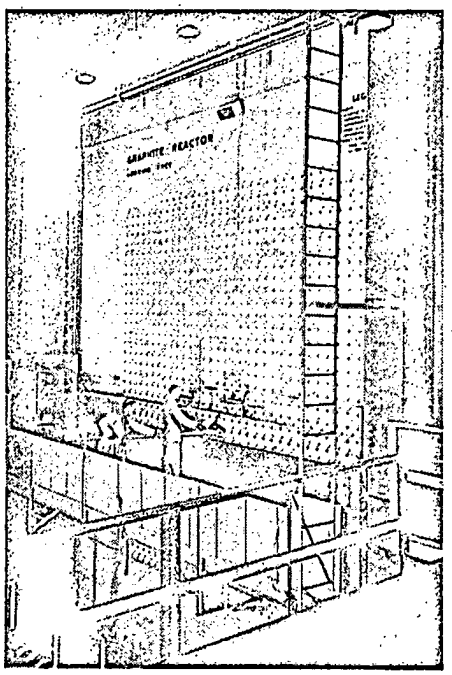
STAT

U-Turn

As a step in lessening cold-war tensions, the U.S., Soviet, and British decision last week (page 18) to cut back the production of materials for nuclear weapons is significant indeed. As a factor in military power, it changes very little.

All three nations now have more than enough nuclear arms in their arsenals to devastate each other. The U.S., says Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, has "tens of thousands of nuclear weapons." One informed scientist puts the total at 50,000. These are engineered into an array of shapes and sizes for every weapon from bazookas to ICBMs. Pentagon experts estimate the Soviet stockpile at about one-sixth the U.S.'s.

By law, the Atomic Energy Commission cannot reveal its output of nuclear materials. But its expenditures must be published. In 1953, for example, the AEC spent $658 million for mining uranium ore, processing it into fissionable materials, and developing atomic weapons. Last year it spent $1.8 billion on the same operations. According to former AEC commissioner Loren K. Olson, by mid-1964 the U.S. will have a uranium surplus worth more than $1 billion. In terms of actual materials, the U.S. stockpile totals "somewhat under 700 tons," calculates physicist Ralph Lapp. This is sufficient, he reckons, to provide 140,000 warheads, each twice as powerful as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.



Oak Ridge: Cut in 'overkill'

The surfeit of atomic weapons, which has been grimly named "overkill," was apparent to some scientists back in 1959, but the Pentagon, instead of converting some of its stockpile, ordered new, smaller, more efficient warheads.

Both the whopping surpluses and better designs have enabled the U.S. to take the initiative in the cutback. By either shutting down plants or reducing the amount of electric power to run others, the AEC's output of enriched uranium will be reduced by 40 per cent and its output of plutonium by 20 per cent over present levels by 1968.

Slowdown: At the sprawling gaseous-diffusion works in Oak Ridge, Tenn., the oldest uranium producing units, built in 1945 and 1946, will be shut down, while other plants will be operating at reduced capacity. Plutonium production will be cut when three reactors at Hanford, Wash., and one at Savannah River in Aiken, S.C., are turned off. Despite this change of pace, the output of other atomic materials—tritium and lithium deuteride, prime ingredients for thermonuclear weapons—will continue at full capacity at Savannah River and at AEC laboratories.

Despite the reduced output of bomb fuels, the AEC and the White House are certain that the U.S. arsenal will remain superior to the Soviet Union's—even if the Russians don't live up to their declarations to "reduce substantially" the production of enriched uranium and to stop construction of two plutonium plants. Still, to police the new East-West "policy of mutual example," the U.S. would prefer an international eye kept on Soviet nuclear capacity.

In hope of setting an example, the U.S. last March announced that the Yankee Atomic Reactor, a privately owned power plant at Rowe, Mass., would be inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The immediate purpose of this move is to train IAEA inspectors to detect clandestine production of fissionable stuff and, thereby, prevent the proliferation of nuclear power. The long-range goal is to develop a worldwide inspection system for disarmament controls.

Safeguards: Inspection and regulation were integral tasks of the IAEA from its beginning in 1957, if only to assure certain safety standards. But, in the past, the agency has often been bypassed—for example, when the U.S., under its Atoms for Peace program, set up bilateral agreements for cooperation in nuclear research and power development with 35 nations and the city of West Berlin. Under these agreements, the U.S. reserved inspection rights for itself. Now, as these agreements are renewed, the U.S. is insisting that the nations accept inspections by the IAEA. So far, only Japan has agreed to inspections of all its reactors. Only Israel among the Atoms for Peace partners has objected—perhaps to conceal its intentions or to give the impression of something to hide.